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Bot, Michiel

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## Elements of Anti-Islam Populism: Critiquing Geert Wilders' Politics of Offense with Marcuse and Adorno

Michiel Bot

The political performances of Dutch anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders revolve around a combination of giving and taking offense.<sup>1</sup> Wilders thrives on qualifying Islam as a “sick,” “fascist,” and “totalitarian ideology”; proposing to ban “the Qur’an, the Islamic *Mein Kampf*”; advocating a “head rag tax” [*kopvoddentaks*] on wearing a hijab in public; arguing that “Moroccan hooligans should be shot in the knees,” and calling government ministers “traitors”; “cowards”; or “completely insane” [*knettergek*] during parliamentary debates.<sup>2</sup> Wilders grounds his offensive rhetoric in indignation, *taking* offense both to Muslims and to “the politically correct elite” of “multiculturalist” “traitors” and “cowards” who seek to suppress his courageous resistance to the “Muslim colonizers,” a term by which he refers to the unskilled labor immigrants who were recruited as “guest workers” from rural regions of Turkey and Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s, together with refugee families from Arab countries.

In this article, I develop a critique of Wilders’ politics of offense by revisiting two classic texts of Frankfurt School critical theory that combine social theory with psychoanalysis: Herbert Marcuse’s 1965 essay, “Repressive Tolerance” (Marcuse 1969) and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s chapter, “Elements of Anti-

Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment” from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; the arguments I focus on are generally considered to have been written primarily by Adorno) (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). Both texts seek to understand reactionary mobilizations of political affect in relation to dominant forms of liberalism that do not live up to their promise of realizing what critical theorists insist on calling true freedom. I will demonstrate how this comprehensive approach makes revisiting these texts useful for critiquing reactionary mobilizations of political affect in the present.

Rereading “Repressive Tolerance” and “Elements of Anti-Semitism” at a time when electoral politics in various countries seem to have been reduced to a choice between neoliberalism and anti-Islam/anti-immigrant populism—Hillary Clinton versus Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron versus Marine Le Pen, Austrian president Alexander Van der Bellen versus FPÖ-chairperson Heinz-Christian Strache, Dutch prime-minister Mark Rutte versus Geert Wilders—suggests good reasons for analyzing such given alternatives not in isolation, but in relation to each other. Thus, I analyze the various ways in which Wilders’ politics of offense relates to discourses of tolerance that neutralize critique and political opposition; discourses of secularism that define themselves in opposition to the religion of others and proscribe the public expression of religious difference; discourses of color blindness that disavow the racial and ethnic positioning of the white majority and deny the existence of racism; and discourses of individual freedom that only promote the needs of capital. I also hope to demonstrate the use of analyzing Wilders’ mobilizations of political affect, through giving and taking offense, in psychoanalytic terms, as instances of what Marcuse called “repressive desublimation”: the removal of some societal barriers to instinctual gratification, not for the sake of liberation, but in the interest of a different kind of domination.

Of course, the point of revisiting “Repressive Tolerance” and “Elements of Anti-Semitism” in order to critique Wilders’ anti-Islam populism is not simply to extract a series of insights from these texts and “apply” those insights to Wilders’ politics of offense. “Repressive Tolerance” and “Elements of Anti-Semitism” are analyses of, and interventions in, specific historical constellations—the United States in the

mid-1960s and Nazi Germany, respectively—and a return to earlier works of critical theory in order to illuminate the present is only useful if it includes historical comparison. I will begin with a brief overview of Wilders' political career; readers familiar with this history may skip the next three paragraphs.

### **Critiquing Tolerance: Political Incorrectness as Repressive Desublimation**

In September 2004, Geert Wilders left the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), after party leader Jozias van Aartsen demanded that he adopt a more "moderate" tone in his critique of Islam. As a Member of Parliament for the VVD, Wilders had co-authored an op-ed with anti-Islam ideologue Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was then also an MP for the VVD, titled, "The Time has Come for a Liberal Jihad," which advocated the suspension of the constitutional rights of Dutch Muslims in order to "[c]ounter the monopoly of the extremist imams on the minds of the young" (Hirsi Ali and Wilders 2003). Wilders had also co-authored a manifesto proposing that "radical Muslims" be expelled from the Netherlands "without mercy" [*zonder pardon*], and that Turkey never be allowed to join the European Union because of its majority Muslim population (Wilders and Oplaat 2004). Finally, Wilders had proposed a prohibition on wearing headscarves, and said in an interview: "Let the headscarves wave on the Malieveld [a large field in The Hague that is used for political protests]. I eat them for breakfast [*Ik lust ze rauw*]" (Wilders 2004).

After leaving the VVD, Wilders founded his own political movement that he would later call the Freedom Party [*Partij voor de Vrijheid*], outlining its program in a "Declaration of Independence." Evoking the 1581 Act of Abjuration with which the Dutch Low Countries declared independence from the Spanish king who, as Wilders put it, "[b]elieved that the people [*volk*] were there for him, not the other way around," Wilders argued the necessity of a new Declaration of Independence, because "the people" were once again "held hostage" by a "complacent" "political elite" of "cowardly and fearful people" who "remained deaf to the problems that

ordinary people struggle with every day" (Wilders 2005). "Freeing ourselves" from this elite, Wilders proclaimed, "we can shape history, take our fate as a people in our own hands"; inaugurate "a new Golden Age" (a reference to the seventeenth century, when the Dutch Republic was a major imperialist power);<sup>3</sup> and fight for "a Netherlands that maintains its own identity and is proud of it; that does not let itself be taken over by cultures that are foreign to its essence [*wezensvreemd*], or lets [*sic*] its identity be diluted by losing itself in supranational institutions" (Wilders 2005). In his 2006 election program, *Klare wijn* ("Straight Talk"), Wilders proposed abolishing the first article of the Dutch Constitution, which prohibits discrimination, and inserting a proclamation that "the Judeo-Christian and humanistic tradition" is "the dominant culture" (Wilders 2006b).

In the 2006 national elections, Wilders won nine of the hundred-and-fifty seats in parliament; in the 2010 elections he obtained an additional fifteen, and from October 2010 to November 2012, Wilders supported the minority coalition of Christian Democrats and the VVD through a so-called "Tolerance Pact" [*Gedoogakkoord*]: Wilders' Freedom Party tolerated (i.e. voted with) the minority government in exchange for a number of political deals. These deals included drastic cuts of the culture budget, which, according to Wilders, only benefited "the leftist elite" (museums that were considered to conserve "the Dutch heritage" were spared, with the notable exception of the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery). The deals also included Dutch vetoes of European Union resolutions condemning Israel's settlement policies in the West Bank (the Freedom Party's foreign policy focuses almost exclusively on supporting the Israeli far-right, because Wilders considers Israel "the West's first line of defense" against Islam, the "buffer [*stootkussen*] of the jihad") (Liphshiz 2009). During the 2014 municipal election night, Wilders asked his audience: "Do you want more or fewer Moroccans in this city and in the Netherlands," provoking them to chant, "Fewer, fewer, fewer!" and promising that he would "take care of that."<sup>4</sup> The Freedom Party's 2017 election program, "The Netherlands Ours Again," proposes closing the borders to all refugees, as well as to all immigrants from "Islamic countries"; closing all mosques and all Islamic schools; banning the Qur'an; and putting "radical Muslims" in "preventive detention." Wilders obtained twenty seats in the 2017 national elections.

Curiously, Wilders' critique of the "politically correct elite" bears some resemblance to Herbert Marcuse's critique of tolerance in "Repressive Tolerance." In that essay, Marcuse argued that tolerance was originally, at the beginning of the modern period, "a partisan goal, a subversive liberating notion and practice" with which "authentic liberals" sought to confront arbitrary domination by feudal powers (Marcuse 1969, 81). However, Marcuse submitted, tolerance had degenerated into an anti-political ideology that sought to neutralize any critique of the status quo, which Marcuse, writing in the United States in the middle of the Vietnam War and after the murders of several Civil Rights Movement activists, saw as a "state of violence and suppression on a global scale" (Marcuse 1969, 82). Under repressive tolerance, Marcuse argued, "[i]t is the people who tolerate the government, which in turn tolerates opposition within the framework determined by the constituted authorities" (Marcuse 1969, 82-3).<sup>5</sup> According to Marcuse, repressive tolerance operated through indoctrination by the media, which prevented radical critique by neutralizing dissent: "Under the rule of monopolistic media—themselves the mere instruments of economic and political power—a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society" (Marcuse 1969, 95). The "public language" "administered" by the mass media, Marcuse submitted, immediately subsumed the negativity of dissent under the positivity of "the normal course of events" (Marcuse 1969, 93). Therefore, Marcuse argued, it was necessary to "break through" "the existing positive" established by the public language, to open up space for negative critique in the interest of liberation and a freedom that is "still to be created" (Marcuse 1969, 87).

A contemporary example of what Marcuse criticized as repressive tolerance is the 2010 congress of the Dutch Christian-Democratic Party that decided on the collaboration with Wilders that I described above: Wilders' support for a minority government coalition of Christian Democrats and the VVD in exchange for the realization of some parts of Wilders' political program. Overjoyed with the outcome, which enabled him to become the Deputy Prime Minister, Christian Democratic party leader Maxime Verhagen notoriously described the congress as "a feast for democracy" (Stokmans 2010). After all, proper procedure had been followed:

party members who opposed the collaboration had been allowed to voice their dissent, and the decision had been put to a vote. A Marcusean analysis of this party congress might be that the party leadership had successfully managed to administer the congress via a public language that normalized Wilders' blatant racism as political disagreement. Indeed, at the press conference where the new minority government presented the "Tolerance Pact" with Wilders, Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced that the three parties had decided to "respect" each other in their differing positions on Islam (Persconferentie 2010).

However, repressive tolerance takes different forms today as well, such as the abuse of anti-discrimination law to smother political opposition. For instance, on October 20, 2015, the French Court of Cassation upheld a 2013 conviction of fourteen activists to pay 1000 euro fines each and 28,000 euros in civil damages for entering a supermarket while wearing T-shirts with the slogan, "Palestine shall live, boycott Israel," and handing out flyers with the text, "Boycott products imported from Israel, to buy products imported from Israel is to legitimize the crimes in Gaza, to approve of the politics of the Israeli government" (Médard 2015).<sup>6</sup> The activists had been convicted under the Law on Freedom of the Press, which prohibits "incitement to discrimination, hatred, or violence towards a group of persons because of their origin or belonging to an ethnicity, race, religion, or specific nation";<sup>7</sup> prosecution had been mandated by the central government.<sup>8</sup> According to the courts, the activists had incited [*provocation*] discrimination against Israeli producers and suppliers. A Marcusean critique of this conviction would be that the activists were convicted for their supposed intolerance towards Israeli producers and suppliers—a far-fetched charge, given that the boycott was targeting products, not persons, and that it had a political aim: to pressure the Israeli government to comply with international law—while the French government tolerates, condones, and even facilitates the ongoing structural violence that the Israeli state inflicts on Palestinians.

A related example of repressive tolerance in the present is the 2012 criminal conviction of four members of the feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot who had performed a "punk prayer" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, as a

protest against Vladimir Putin and the Orthodox Patriarch's endorsement of Putin. Among other things, the women were convicted of "offending the feelings of believers" (Lipman 2012a and 2012b). Disturbingly, this phrase originates in a 1994 landmark judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, *Otto Preminger Institut v. Austria*, which did not find for a violation of an Austrian movie theater's freedom of expression when local government authorities prevented a screening of Werner Schroeter's film adaptation of Oskar Panizza's 1895 anti-Catholic play, *The Council of Love*. The European Court had argued: "The Court cannot disregard the fact that the Roman Catholic religion is the religion of the overwhelming majority of Tyroleans. In seizing the film, the Austrian authorities acted to ensure religious peace in that region and to prevent that some people should feel the object of attacks on their religious beliefs in an unwarranted and offensive manner."<sup>9</sup> Ignoring the critical thrust of the protest performance and of the film, and reframing the challenges they pose to the political role of powerful religious institutions as "attacks on feelings," these judgments enforce a model of repressive tolerance that mandates the avoidance of offense and respect for "feelings" in the name of ensuring (religious) peace.

Instances of repressive tolerance abound, and there is plenty of reason to oppose contemporary imperatives to avoid offense that neutralize critiques of the status quo.<sup>10</sup> However, Wilders' "critique" of contemporary discourses of tolerance is a very different one: what Wilders attacks is the supposed permissiveness of a regime that allows Muslims to exercise their freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, and that thus permits the expression of cultural and religious difference in public, while censoring "critics" as racists. Thus, Marcuse's argument is turned around completely. It is crucial to observe, however, that the upshot of Wilders' supposed radical critique is generally an affirmation of, rather than a challenge to the status quo, if it is not simply destructive of the fundamental rights of others and of institutions of the rule of law, such as the courts where he has had to stand trial for some of his rhetoric. For although Wilders occasionally claims that multicultural tolerance is the ideological prop for the elite's selling-out the nation and promotion of "mass immigration" in order to destroy the accomplishments of the welfare state for "ordinary Dutch people," his party in fact often votes

for the neoliberal resolutions put forward by his former party, the VVD (Pelgrim and Steenbergen 2017).

Indeed, although Wilders consistently presents his offensive rhetoric as an attempt to break through a repressive regime of multicultural tolerance, his rhetoric itself is a textbook example of the affective mechanism of repressive tolerance, which Marcuse called "repressive desublimation": taking away some societal barriers to instinctual gratification in the interest of domination. Marcuse based his analyses of repressive desublimation on Freud's concept of sublimation: the process by which an individual's impulses are diverted from their sexual aims and directed towards socially-valued objects (Laplanche and Pontalis 2004, 465–467). Freud saw civilization as the result of continuous sublimation by individuals, who are initially pressured by their parents and by society, and who later pressure themselves to renounce the sexual aims of their impulses and redirect these impulses towards work, affection, friendship, artistic creation, intellectual inquiry, etc. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud saw civilization's sublimation of people's impulses as inevitably causing a considerable amount of unhappiness, which would periodically erupt into orgies of violence against perceived "outsiders" (Freud 2010, 72–3). By contrast, Marcuse argued in *Eros and Civilization* that unhappiness was not the inevitable result of the sublimation demanded by civilization as such, but of the sublimation imposed by a repressive civilization in the interest of domination (Marcuse 1962, 71–95). For Marcuse, sublimation was by no means intrinsically repressive: he argued that a civilization in which people liberated themselves from domination would allow for a *nonrepressive* sublimation of their impulses, which could be directed towards all kinds of free activities, relationships, and objects that could have an erotic charge that would not be limited to sex, and that, unlike repressive desublimation, would provide true gratification.

Crucially, then, for Marcuse, the purpose of critique—liberation—is not *desublimation*: removing the societal sublimation of the impulses of its members altogether. Instead, the purpose of critique is to substitute a *nonrepressive* for a repressive sublimation, that is, to reorganize the ways in which society sublimates the impulses of its members, to get rid of structures of domination and instead create

a free society in which people are able to determine their own lives together with others. By contrast, repressive *desublimation* allows individuals to indulge their impulses in ways that give a certain kind of pleasure, but that serve the forces of domination.

Although Wilders grounds his offense in an opposition against a permissiveness that he claims to be repressive, his rhetoric of offense, far from being oriented towards a nonrepressive sublimation, in fact allows for the repressive desublimation of his audience's impulses, directing them against Muslims. This repressive desublimation often operates through laughter. Consider Wilders' notorious proposal for a *kopvoddentaks*, a "head rag tax,"<sup>11</sup> during the parliamentary debate on the 2010 budget, which I will quote at some length in order to give a sample of his rhetoric:

"This government, this elite, does not have the slightest will to resist (...) Islamization. It sees it as a beautiful enrichment of the Dutch landscape. All those cozy mosques, all those nice headscarves, all those snug burqas: they really make the Netherlands a lot prettier. Here and there someone drops dead, occasionally someone gets raped, and the country is going bankrupt at some point, but that cannot spoil the fun. That is mere detail. Just be patient for a little longer, and then the Islamic utopia awaits us.

A better environment begins with you. A great many Dutch people are annoyed [*ergeren zich*] at the pollution of public space by Islam. In other words, in certain places our street scene more and more resembles the street scene in Mecca or Tehran: headscarves, *haardbaarden*,<sup>12</sup> burqas, and men in weird long white dresses. Let us do something about that for once. Let us reconquer our streets. Let us ensure that the Netherlands is finally going to resemble the Netherlands again. Those headscarves really are a symbol of female oppression, a sign of subjection, a sign of conquest. They form a symbol of an ideology that intends to colonize us. Therefore, the time has come for a great cleaning of our streets. If our *nieuwe Nederlanders*<sup>13</sup> like to show their love for this seventh-century desert ideology, they should do so in an Islamic country, but not here. Not in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has excise taxes. We have excises on gas and diesel. We have excises on parking. We have excises on dogs. We used to have excises on flying. We still have excises on packaging materials. My first proposal: why not the introduction of a headscarf tax? I would like to call it a *kopvoddentaks*. Just get a permit once a year and pay right away. A thousand Euros a year seems like a nice amount to me. Then we will finally earn back a little of what has already cost us so much. I would say: the polluter pays" (Algemene beschouwingen miljoenennota 2010, 2009).

With its rhetoric of nationalism, pollution, and cleaning, and a supposed conquest or colonization of "our" space by something that does not resemble "the Netherlands," this speech uses an imagery of ethnic cleansing and contains an urgent call to action ("Let us reconquer our streets"). However, this hyperbolic, sarcastic proposal is also intended humorously. Wilders' parodic appropriation of a government slogan from the 1990s promoting environmental awareness ("A better environment begins with you") and of a principle of environmental law ("The polluter pays") are intended to provoke laughter, because Wilders generally dismisses any environmental policy as a "leftist hobby." The concrete proposal that Wilders launches—to impose a tax on wearing headscarves—is not only impossible to realize because it would violate the Dutch Constitution and human rights law: it is also diametrically opposed to Wilders' frequent insistence on smaller government, less bureaucracy, and lower taxes, not to mention the word "freedom" in the name of his party. And the highly offensive word *kopvoddentaks*—an onomatopoeia of Wilders' disgust of head scarfs, with its sequence of consonants that almost need to be spat out in order to pronounce them—is a farcical neologism that underscores the preposterous nature of the proposal. The pleasure that this rhetoric can give to some of Wilders' supporters might be considered a typical example of what Marcuse called repressive desublimation.

To further elaborate my critique of Wilders' politics of offense, I turn, in the next section, to an earlier work of critical theory: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment" from *Dialectic of*

*Enlightenment*.<sup>14</sup> Although Horkheimer and Adorno do not use the term “repressive desublimation,” their analysis of anti-Semitism as a “counterrevolutionary” instrumentalization of “the rebellion of oppressed nature against domination,” which also builds on the later work of Freud, has many similarities with Marcuse’s writings.<sup>15</sup> Returning to “Elements of Anti-Semitism” is useful for analyzing Wilders’ rhetoric of offense, because whereas Marcuse focuses on the commodified gratification of sexual desires, the satisfaction of material pseudo-needs, and the depoliticized release of privatized frustration,<sup>16</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno concentrate on Freud’s primary example of repressive desublimation in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, namely anti-Semitism (Freud 2010, 72-3). Furthermore, an important element in Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of anti-Semitism is laughter.

### **Offense and Mimesis: Paranoia, Projection, Ridicule**

At the heart of “Elements of Anti-Semitism” is the thesis that anti-Semitism is a false projection of the self’s internal impulses of fear and hostility onto an “other.” This false projection is an inversion of a “true” or “human” way of relating to the world, which Horkheimer and Adorno designate with the paradoxical term, “authentic mimesis”: the “capacity (...) for reflection as an interpenetration of receptivity and imagination” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 164-165). Anti-Semitism’s pathological inversion of authentic mimesis takes place as a reaction against the repression of mimesis by what Horkheimer and Adorno call the “existing universal,” as opposed to the yet-to-be-realized universal of a truly free society. They describe the existing universal as an “empty,” purely instrumental form of rationality that has its origins in ancient Greece, but that has almost completely come to dominate society with the development of modern technology and capitalism.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, giving and taking offense are central to the anti-Semitic reaction against this existing universal. With a historical stroke that is as broad as Freud’s in *Civilization and Its Discontent*, which they cite in the footnotes, Horkheimer and Adorno argue: “Civilization has replaced the organic adaptation to otherness, i.e. mimetic behavior proper, initially, in the magical

phase, with the organized manipulation of mimesis, and finally, in the historical phase, with rational practice, work. Uncontrolled mimesis is ostracized” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 148). With the triumph of technology in “late capitalism,” they contend: “All that remains of the adaptation to nature is the hardening against it,” that is, “the blind mastery of nature, which is identical to farsighted instrumentality” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 149). However, mimesis reappears in encounters with others whose mimetic gestures are perceived as offensive (*anstößig*). Evoking—in a rather problematic way—contemporary stereotypes of “Ostjuden,” Jewish people of Eastern European origin, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that Jewish people display, in their gestures and emotions, an “obsolete merchant behavior” that confronts Germans who are not Jewish with their repressed humanity, because this behavior is at least somewhat mimetic.<sup>17</sup> According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the offense taken to the mimetic gestures or emotions of others leads those who take offense not primarily to a renewed identification with the proscription of mimesis by the existing universal, but to an indulgence of their own mimetic drive in a form that makes this indulgence only a “wretched parody of fulfillment.” With anti-Semitism, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, taking offense becomes a pretext for an exclusionary group formation that takes place through the repressive pleasure of indulging the repressed mimetic drive, which often happens through laughter, ridiculing, or guffawing that is merely a parody of true joy and happiness. Anti-Semitism allows individuals to indulge their mimetic drive in a repressive way, both through their participation in the fascist apparatus that manipulates this drive, and vicariously, through the caricatural performances of anti-Semitic leaders:

“The Führer, with his ham actor’s face and his charisma of crankable hysteria, leads the round dance. His performance accomplishes by proxy and in effigy what is denied to everyone else in reality. Hitler can gesticulate like a clown, Mussolini risk false notes like a provincial tenor, Goebbels talk as glibly as the Jewish agent whose murder he is recommending, Coughlin<sup>18</sup> preach love like the Savior himself, whose crucifixion he impersonates for the sake of always more bloodshed. Fascism is also totalitarian in that it seeks to make the rebellion of oppressed nature against

domination immediately useful for domination" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 153).

What might be the relevance of "Elements of Anti-Semitism" for an analysis of Geert Wilders' anti-Islam politics of offense? The rapid acceleration of globalization during the last few decades has intensified the hegemony of what Horkheimer and Adorno saw as the "existing universal." More than ever before, the "rationality" of capital, and the discourses of liberal individualism that often accompany it, suppress, or render irrelevant, modes of identification and affiliation that have an essential mimetic component, such as national, linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, familial, professional, political, and religious identifications and affiliations (Balibar 2002 and 2011). National identifications are rendered less relevant with the nation-state's diminishing role as the primary unit of political, social, and economic organization, and declared obsolete in the name of certain versions of cosmopolitanism. Linguistic identifications are rendered less important by the increasing use of "global" English as the default language. Professional identifications are rendered irrelevant by the deprofessionalization, in the name of free competition, of work that used to require formal training or membership of professional organizations. Religious identifications and affiliations are relegated entirely to the private sphere by discourses of secularism that reduce religion to an individual (lifestyle) choice and proscribe religious expression in public (Asad 2003). And racial or ethnic difference is disavowed by a discourse of color blindness that refuses to acknowledge racial or ethnic privilege and categorically denies the existence of racism.

Geert Wilders' anti-Islam politics of offense can be interpreted as a reaction against the manifestation of these universals in the Netherlands. Against the universality of capital, cosmopolitanism, secularism, and color blindness, the gestures, expressions, emotions, languages, accents, voices, hairstyles, and clothing of Muslims—or, sometimes more broadly, of presumed immigrants or *allochthonen*, those who originate from "other soil"—stand out as markedly different. An electorate that has internalized the proscription of mimesis, of identifying as being anything other than as private, self-possessed, entrepreneurial, secular, color blind, liberal individ-

uals, may perceive this difference as offensive. Indeed, the indignant and acrimonious reactions against recent attempts to transform the figure of Black Pete, the notorious black-faced "helper" of the Dutch Santa Claus, suggest a similar mechanism. This indignation seems to stem from the confrontation with a historically—more specifically: colonially—developed racial and ethnic difference in a context where, as Gloria Wekker observes in her recent book, *White Innocence*, "whiteness is not acknowledged as a racialized/ethnicized positioning at all" (Wekker 2016, 2). An interpretation of Wilders' politics along the lines of "Elements of Anti-Semitism" would be that Wilders taps into the offense that some people, alienated from their mimetic drive, take to the sensible difference of Muslims, and that he uses this offense to form an exclusionary collective by giving them license to indulge their impulses of hostility and mimesis, in a repressive way.

Consider Wilders' 2008 propaganda video *Fitna* (Wilders 2008). *Fitna* begins with an animation of a Koran that opens by itself: the left page shows the Danish cartoon caricature of the prophet Muhammad wearing a bomb with a noisily burning fuse as a turban; the right page has a digital clock counting down seconds from fifteen minutes. A hand turns the page back; on the right is a Koran passage in Arabic; on the left, an English translation: "Surah 6, verse 60: Prepare for them whatever force and cavalry ye are able of gathering/to strike terror/to strike terror into the hearts of the enemies, of Allah and your enemies"; a voice-over recites the text in Arabic. The right page fades into footage of an airplane flying into the World Trade Center; this footage then goes full-screen, and the recitation fades into Edward Grieg's mournful and majestic "Aase's Death" from *Peer Gynt*. This alternation of Koran recitations and video footage continues for nine minutes. As well as the bombings in Madrid and London, the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, and a decapitation, the footage also shows calls for violence addressed to agitated crowds, a three-year old girl asserting that the Koran teaches that Jews are apes and pigs, and veiled women holding up a sign that "Hitler was right."

The second half of the video is marked by the heading, "The Netherlands under the Spell of Islam," and by a temporary transition from Grieg's mourning to the



subdued orientalism of Tchaikovsky's "Arabian Dance" from *The Nutcracker*. Footage of Muslims in the Netherlands and statistics that show a sharp increase in the number of Muslims, still superimposed on a book page, blend into a postcard depicting five Dutch mosques and reading, "Greetings from the Netherlands," with a voice-over of fundamentalist sermons recorded in Dutch mosques (translations are given in subtitles). The next heading reads: "The Netherlands in the Future?!" and is followed by footage of a stoning, a young girl with her legs tied together (presumably because her genitals have just been ritually mutilated), a man expressing his violent homophobia, etc., ultimately blending back into two Koran pages in Arabic. A hand appears and turns a page, the image turns black, with the sound of a page being torn out. Then follows the moral, in white letters: "The sound you heard was a page being removed from the phonebook. / For it is not up to me, but to Muslims themselves to tear out the hateful verses from the Koran." After a few more lines, culminating in the slogan: "Stop Islamisation / Defend our freedom," the cartoon of the bomb-turban reappears on a white page, the clock counts down to 00:00, and the explosion is represented as lightning, rumblings, and thunder. The Koran closes and the credits appear, listing Wilders as the script writer and "Scarlet Pimpernel" as the director and editor, reusing the pseudonym of the fictional English fop whose heroism—helping French aristocrats escape the guillotine to England during the Terror—had to remain a secret, even to his tragically confused wife.<sup>19</sup>

*Fitna* casts Islam as a lawless force whose full catastrophic explosion is yet to come. Figuring the prophet Muhammad as a ticking time bomb, *Fitna*'s message, inserted immediately before the lightning, rumbling, and thunder at the end, is that "we"—the Dutch, Europe, the West—need to arrest the countdown towards the apocalypse and stop the "Islamisation" of "our" territory, restraining the imminent explosion of this lawless force into global violence. At the same time, *Fitna* shows resemblances to jihadist propaganda videos on the internet that draw on apocalyptic imagery from the Qur'an. Furthermore, the film uses an Islamic legal concept as its title (Wilders explained in an interview: "Islam and the Koran are my test. For me, the depraved [*verderfelijke*] Islam is fitna"), and Wilders frequently mimics

other Islamic legal concepts as well: he has advocated the suspension of constitutional rights for Muslims by arguing that the time has come for a "liberal jihad." He has also dismissed critics of his anti-Islam rhetoric as *dhimmis* (non-Muslim subjects of a state governed by Sharia law), and he has used the concept of *taqiyya* to accuse Muslims of deception.<sup>20</sup> *Fitna* and the jihad propaganda videos that it seems to mirror might both be analyzed as instances of repressive desublimation that emerge as reactions against a specific kind of globalization, mimicking each other's paranoid projections of impulses of fear and hostility and thus foreclosing what Horkheimer and Adorno call "authentic mimesis," reflective responsiveness to difference.<sup>21</sup>

Another reason for returning to "Elements of Anti-Semitism" for interpreting Wilders' rhetoric and imagery of offense might be that one of Horkheimer and Adorno's main analytical moves is away from the "Jewish question" and towards the question of anti-Semitism. According to the analyses developed in "Elements of Anti-Semitism," it is a mistake to treat the distinction between Jews and non-Jews as a question that needs to be answered or as a problem that needs to be solved. The distinction between Jews and non-Jews only becomes a problem because of anti-Semitism, which emerges as a pathological reaction against the existing universal of liberal capitalism. The free society that is the horizon of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory does not solve the supposed problem of Jewish particularism by sublating the distinction between Jews and non-Jews into a "true" universal. On the contrary: instead of imposing sameness, a truly free society, for Horkheimer and Adorno, would be a space for the free expression of difference and for the non-repressive, "authentic" mimesis of such difference.<sup>22</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the "Jewish question" can inspire a critique of the proposition that Europe, or the Netherlands, has a "Muslim question" that needs to be answered, a "Muslim problem" that needs to be solved, and it might suggest a shift of the analytical focus to the question of anti-Islam populism.

Towards the end of *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggested that there was not just a structural similarity but also a historical continuity between anti-Semitism and post-World War II anti-Arab animus, an animus which he connected with "a fear

that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world" (Said 1978, 287). In his essay, *Semites*, Gil Anidjar argues that this suggestion, which remains undeveloped in *Orientalism*, "[s]hould have become an entire field of study" (Anidjar 2008, 122, endnote 76). Calling for analyses that recognize "[t]he ways in which these two political identities—the Jew, the Arab—have been coconstituted [sic] by, and most importantly, with and within Europe," Anidjar asks: "What is Europe such that it has managed to distinguish itself from both Jew and Arab (...) and to render its role in the theologico-political distinction, in the separation and enmity of Jew and Arab invisible—invisible, perhaps most of all to and within 'itself'?" (Anidjar 2008, 36). Anidjar's suggestion that the creation of the Israeli state and the so-called Middle East conflict have become a crucial site for European "political-theological" self-definitions is certainly applicable to Wilders' anti-Islam populism: as I mentioned above, supporting the Israeli far-right is the Freedom Party's primary foreign policy concern. And while Wilders used to distance himself strongly from other European far-right parties, in part, it seems, because of their anti-Semitism, he has recently been seeking alliances with other European far-right parties such as the Front National in France, which has toned down its anti-Semitic rhetoric and switched targets to Islam. However, while genealogies like the ones proposed by Anidjar are important, and while Wilders' particular criticisms of Islam and the specifics of his Israel politics need to be historicized, Horkheimer and Adorno's displacement of "the Jewish question" in "Elements of Anti-Semitism" also allows for an analysis of the way in which the distinction between the Dutch people and Muslims itself is enacted, through offense and ridicule, as a pathological manifestation of drives that ought to be channeled differently.

## Conclusion

On a Saturday afternoon in January, 2016, Wilders visited the busy produce market on the central square of Spijkenisse, a town near Rotterdam where many people vote for Wilders' Freedom Party, to hand out "resistance spray," cans of red spray paint with which women were to defend themselves against "testosterone bombs."<sup>23</sup> Wilders used the mass sexual assaults in Cologne on the previous New

Year's Eve to claim that asylum seekers posed a "great danger" to "the Dutch women," because many of them "have a morality, for instance when it comes to interacting with women, that is not *our* morality." A group of about ten women protested Wilders' action with signs and slogans like, "Wilders [is a] racist, not [a] feminist"; "Not in our name"; and "My feminism is anti-racist: emancipation for woman *and* refugee"; one of the protesters calmly addressed Wilders through a megaphone: "Dear mister Wilders, we applaud your great concern for the safety and rights of victims of sexist violence in the Netherlands..." The protesters provoked angry shouting from Wilders' supporters. A white man with a toddler on his arm was captured on camera, screaming past the ear of his crying child: "You want to be raped! You want to be raped! You are filthy! You are really fucking filthy! Bah! Bah! Bah bah bah! You want cock! You cannot get cock, because you are ugly!"<sup>24</sup> Oddly, it was the feminist protesters who were arrested; the prosecutors decided months later not to prosecute them, but the arrests ended the demonstration.

Commenters on social media were quick to ridicule the young father as an ignorant, anti-social, lower class individual with poor parenting skills.<sup>25</sup> However, I hope to have demonstrated the importance of confronting the affective mechanism at work here: the man's sexist rant was grounded in indignation about the feminists' demonstration, and mirrors the rhetorical-affective phenomenon that is at the heart of Geert Wilders' own political performances, namely that of giving and taking offense. But what the protesters were facing was not only the offensive rhetoric and the indignation of Wilders and his supporters, but also the repressive tolerance enforced by a mayor who tolerated Wilders and his supporters dominating the central public space in her town with his racist ideology, while having the protesters arrested.

To contest repressive tolerance, Marcuse urged his readers to "break the established universe of meaning" (Marcuse 1969, 98). However, breaking the established universe of meaning, the "public language" that neutralizes critique, is particularly challenging at a time when anti-Islam populists such as Wilders have themselves

appropriated the critique of tolerance, and present their politics of offense as resistance against the “politically correct” public language. In addition, considerable parts of the public sphere have been poisoned by the nihilist maxim that “what can be offended must be offended,” which gained much traction in the Netherlands after the murders of anti-Islam politician Pim Fortuyn by an animal rights activist in 2002 and of filmmaker and self-proclaimed village idiot Theo van Gogh by a college drop-out-turned-Islamist in 2004 (“what can be offended must be offended” might be considered Van Gogh’s life motto). The idea that indiscriminate offense is inherently critical has been monetized, among various other media, by the highly popular Dutch shocklog, *Geenstijl*, which adopts an expression of moral disapproval—*dat is geen stijl*, literally: that is styleless, i.e. it violates basic standards of decency—as a badge of honor, prides itself on being “tendentious, groundless, and gratuitously offensive” [*nodeloos kwetsend*], and encourages readers to post unfiltered tirades in response to its sarcastic, ad hominem tabloid journalism, usually about politicians or celebrities who are deemed hypocritical or pretentious, or about women and minorities who are considered to manifest themselves too conspicuously in the public sphere.<sup>26</sup> Instead of creating a space for critique and discussion among an active public, *Geenstijl* produces a solitary virtual crowd of white, heterosexual, male, middle-class users who affirm the same exclusionary messages over and over again in monological *reacties*.

Revisiting “Repressive Tolerance” and “Elements of Anti-Semitism” suggests that an effective contestation of this “public language” requires an engagement with the subjective and affective dimensions of politics, rather than a defense of “neutral” forms of liberalism that attempt to bracket or repress these dimensions altogether. Rereading “Repressive Tolerance” suggests that the freedom to offend needs to be reclaimed from anti-Islam populists like Wilders and from offense-for-the-sake-of-offense nihilists, and mobilized, for instance, through public demonstrations that do not merely “express an opinion,” but that, in Marcuse’s terms, actively seek to enact a “rupture.” Thus, the feminist protesters in Spijkenisse sought to break the link established by Wilders between sexual assault and Muslims or immigrants, and between anti-Islam and anti-immigrant politics and feminism, by insisting on

protesting at the produce market, where everyone could see them, disobeying apparent orders to move the demonstration to a different location, refusing to tolerate a Wilders stunt that took place on a central location without noticeable contestation, and that Wilders’ racism was framed as a contribution to the “marketplace of ideas.” Reclaiming the freedom to offend might also imply breaking the taboo on calling Wilders a fascist, a taboo that is upheld not only by people arguing that comparisons with fascism are an affront to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and an insult to the people who vote for Wilders, but also by liberals who argue that comparisons with fascism are too “loaded” to play a productive role in public discussion.<sup>27</sup>

But revisiting “Repressive Tolerance” and “Elements of Anti-Semitism” also suggests the importance of reclaiming the freedom to *take* offense and to express indignation, that is, to insist on the need for nonrepressive sublimation. The freedom to take offense might be opposed to the sizeable “liberal” opinion industry that dismisses a wide array of social justice struggles as “identity politics,” complains that political correctness is the greatest problem of our time, and is obsessed with calls for trigger warnings and safe spaces on U.S. college campuses that, I would argue, are sometimes rather necessary. Obviously, Marcuse’s and Horkheimer and Adorno’s texts do not contain blueprints for political action, but I hope to have indicated some ways in which returning to the critical practice that they embody might help us move beyond simplistic analyses of populist affect, and contribute to imagining a nonrepressive politics in the present.

## Notes

1] I would like to thank Drucilla Cornell and Wout Cornelissen for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2] For a lexicon of Wilders’ rhetoric, see Jan Kuitenbrouwer, *De woorden van Wilders en hoe ze werken* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010). All translations of Wilders’ rhetoric are mine.

3] The subtitle of Wilders' 2006 "Plan voor een nieuwe gouden eeuw" [Plan for a New Golden Age] translates as: "Lower taxes, smaller government, substantial improvement of middle incomes." Wilders, 2006. The title may have been conceived by analogy with William Kristol and Robert Kagan's Project for the New American Century, which existed from 1997 to 2006. For an early analysis of the financial support for Wilders by anti-Islam foundations in the United States, see Freke Vuijst, 2009.

4] On December 9, 2016, the District Court in The Hague convicted Wilders of incitement to discrimination, without, however, imposing a penalty.

5] Marcuse's basic diagnosis of a change from an original to a lapsed or degenerated form of tolerance follows a familiar trope in Frankfurt School analyses of liberalism, for instance in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (particularly the theses on anti-Semitism that I discuss below) and in Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. An earlier critique that focuses specifically on the concept of tolerance is Erich Fromm's "Die gesellschaftliche Bedingtheit der psychoanalytischen Therapie" (Fromm, 1935).

6] The activists had been found not guilty in the first instance by the Tribunal Correctionnel de Mulhouse in December, 2011.

7] This prohibition had been added to the 1881 law in 1972, to implement the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

8] In February, 2010, the then Minister of Justice, Michèle Alliot-Marie, had issued a memo—the "circulaire Alliot-Marie"—requesting that prosecutors bring criminal charges against individuals calling for a boycott of Israeli products. See Médard, 2015.

9] *Otto Preminger Institut v. Austria*, par. 56. I have analyzed this judgment in Bot, 2012.

10] See, on this topic, also Brown, 2006. Brown barely mentions Marcuse's essay, even though her critique of tolerance as a discourse of repression is quite similar to Marcuse's. However, unlike Marcuse's essay, Brown's Foucauldian discourse analysis does not contain an emancipatory alternative to "tolerance as a discourse of depoliticization"; "tolerance as a discourse of power"; "tolerance as governmentality"; "tolerance as/in civilizational discourse," to mention some of Brown's chapter titles. Marcuse refers to the emancipatory alternative to repressive tolerance as "discriminatory," "liberating," or "universal" tolerance (Marcuse, 1969:107, 109, 111).

11] The Dutch word for the human head is *hoofd*; a *kop* is an animal's head.

12] The neologism *haardbaarden*, "hearth beards," sounds like *baatbaarden*, "hate beards." Jan Kuitenbrouwer points out that members of parliament have to approve the transcripts before they are published, so that Wilders deliberately had the word *haardbaarden* be put on record. Kuitenbrouwer suggests that Wilders may have wanted to avoid a reprimand by the moderator, but it is more likely that he wanted to avoid another hate speech charge, even though it is dubious that a judge would make much of the difference. Kuitenbrouwer, 2010:96).

13] "New Dutch": a term denoting immigrants and their second and third generation descendants that was briefly used as an alternative for the stigmatizing word, *allochtoon*. Wilders here uses the term sarcastically.

14] I have modified the translation throughout.

15] Indeed, similarities between Marcuse's work and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* led to considerable tensions. See Wiggershaas, 1994:497.

16] Marcuse develops the concept of repressive desublimation most fully in *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1991:56–83). In "Repressive Tolerance," Marcuse analyzes repressive desublimation as a mechanism of depoliticization (Marcuse, 1969:115).

17] I thank David Kettler for discussing Horkheimer and Adorno's use of these stereotypes with me.

18] Charles Coughlin (1891–1979) was a Canadian-born anti-Semitic radio preacher and Roman Catholic priest who migrated to the United States in 1923.

19] Cf. Emmuska Orczy's 1903 play and adventure novel, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Orczy herself was a baroness who was born in Hungary and escaped the threat of a revolution with her parents in 1868, ultimately to London.

20] "Koranfilm Wilders heet Fitna," Nu.nl February 9, 2008.

21] On the relations between militant secularism and Islamic terror, see Roy, 2005. See also Scroggins, 2012, which suggestively juxtaposes the biographies of an anti-Islam ideologist and an Islamic terrorist. Joost Bosland also discusses projection and polarizing identification in his diagnosis of the "madness around Wilders" (Bosland, 2010:70–1).

22] For a discussion of this topic in other texts by Adorno, see Düttmann, 2000.

23] <http://www.hartvannederland.nl/nederland/zuid-holland/2016/arrestaties-bij-uitdelen-verzet-spray-wilders-spijkenisse/>

24] <http://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/137513/Wilders-deelt-verzetsspray-uit-in-Spijkenisse>

25] See, for instance: [http://www.dumpert.nl/mediabase/6715913/eabe7992/tokkie\\_schreeuwt\\_jul-lie\\_willen\\_verkracht\\_worden\\_tegen\\_feministen.html](http://www.dumpert.nl/mediabase/6715913/eabe7992/tokkie_schreeuwt_jul-lie_willen_verkracht_worden_tegen_feministen.html)

26] For a critique of this shocklog, see Lovink, 2008.

27] For a good overview of this taboo, see Broer, 2017.

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## Biography

### Michiel Bot

Michiel Bot is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Law, Jurisprudence, and Legal History at Tilburg University (Netherlands), where he teaches courses in law and humanities. He holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from New York University, where he wrote a dissertation titled, "The Right to Offend: Contested Speech Acts and Critical Democratic Practice," and he has held postdoctoral fellowships and visiting appointments at Bard College (New York) and Al-Quds Bard College (Palestine).